

Christmas Eve 2022

It's been three years since we've gathered like this. Indoors, all together, to sing gustily, cheek by jowl: for the better part of these last three years, this was risky behavior.

It's good to be back—and not a day went by when I didn't miss it. Sorely. The church is nothing if not a gathering, an assembly.

In fact, that's what the earliest word now translated "church" means. *Ekklesia* is Greek, and usually translated "church." A word that shows up in the Gospel of Matthew, it's to indicate this new thing being generated by the so-called Christ Event, an *ekklesia*, an assembly or a gathering, and one whose organizing principal is love. Neither bloodline nor tribe, neither nation nor regional happenstance, neither admission to a school or club nor achievement nor accomplishment nor ability to pay, neither this identity or that affinity group: the *ekklesia*, this gathering is simply to love. Love, invoked, embodied, sounded out in appeal, like church bells pealing. Ring out, manifest love! Enacted love!

Which isn't to say that's always the case that love is simply and unambiguously enacted in church. And it certainly isn't to say it's *only* enacted in church. No, of course: in fact, ask any devoted church-goer, which maybe you are, and they'll just have to admit there's no fight like a church fight.

Having said that, there aren't many other gatherings in this life, in this world, where you can come as you are simply to participate in love. Its building up. Its finding a task. Its getting to work. Care, compassion, love.

For such an activity, we should admit, Zoom will do. Zoom has done. With Covid restrictions, the move to Zoom did just fine. For those with a computer or phone, for those with good enough Wi-Fi or cell service (which, it bears saying, doesn't include a lot of people, functionally excludes a lot of people, exclusion which is anathema to the church) Zoom maintained connection just fine. Though lacking some of the robustness, the power of rejuvenation; and though lacking the power to bring in the new to full and equal membership: Zoom was fine. It maintained.

On Christmas, though, its lack was pronounced.

Christmas, after all—both the holiday and the season to follow, just twelve days long—is all about the incarnation of God. That God became flesh; that God, the transcendent, eternal, and creative power of all things, became one of those things, born as any of us are born, to live as any

of us do, eventually to die as though only the most unfortunate, indeed grossly, unjustly, abusively treated of us do, but then to rise and to return to this warring world with this to say, “Peace be with you,”: the whole astonishing, baffling point of this event, for which Advent is the season of preparation, is incarnation.

Incarnation. Embodiment.

God as an embodied person come to gather an embodied expression of the spirit of this then risen person: the church is less to be an organization than an organism, an embodiment.

I don’t know about you, but for me, when we all had to keep our distance from one another, by which move of distancing we expressed our care, and when so many of our relationships became virtual more than embodied, became distanced rather than close, my feelings intensified. I became hurt easier. I became disappointed easier. I was even offended, rubbed raw so much easier.

Grief, I recently heard it said, is love with nowhere to go.

Grief is love with nowhere to go, no one to receive it, no vessel in which to pour it out, that middle space of negotiation between the “I” and the “Thou” of any given encounter. The loss that often results in grief: it’s a loss of an object of love, which leaves now love like an ungrounded wire, a power seeking an outlet, so now potentially dangerous.

I look around and see the state of our society, I turn an ear to listen to our conversation writ large, and I witness so much acrimony, so much presumption of ill-will, so little crediting of good will and acting in good faith; and I can’t help but think that what would really help here is resuming our life together in embodied form. Being close to someone else, in spirit and in body: this dissipates so much of that acrimony, that aggression. Turns out, making ourselves present to one another, in soft flesh, in seeing eyes, in sonorous voice, puts to flight so much fear, so much frustration.

Now there’s a Christmas worth giving—ourselves; a gift worth receiving—one another.
Mutual presence as the present.

Oh, the baby is crying. Pick him up. Pick her up. Pick them up. Be soothing. Be soothed.

This is Christmas

Merry Christmas.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, you who've come to be amidst creation and who thus calls to our consciousness what we are as well, mere people, wondrous people: help us to love.

There is so much in this world that seems not of love. We continue in our warring madness, our wonton wastefulness, our consuming of your creation with little care and still less caution. We wither amidst our machines and suffer loneliness for what connectivity they promise and even thinly provide. Our bodies bear the brunt of this withering, this loneliness.

This Christmas eve, renew in us hope; rejuvenate among us good will and a pouring forth of grace. Restore us to your justice and help us to pursue it in life, and with our lives, as it abides in everlasting to everlasting. Help us to see the promise and power of your presence in the sweetness of a baby, the vulnerability shown forth and the care evoked.

On this holiday that so often stirs in us nostalgia, a hazy remembering of what never quite was, stir also within us and among us resilience in our receiving and pursuing what is yet to come, a way of abundance and ebullient joy which is for all the world—this world, in all its parts and particles and wondrous, dynamic entirety, this world which you so love.

Truly, on this holiday that lends itself to looking back, help us also to look forward, in fortitude, in faithful good will and stout good purpose. Empowered by the Holy Spirit within us and among us and ever going before us, help us to enact your reign, manifest your kingdom, that the whole world might echo back your glorious strain, "Peace on earth. Good will toward all people, all creatures of your making! Alleluia; alleluia!" Amen.